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ABSTRACT

Oklahoma State University applied for and received federal funding to offer instruction in Spanish and French to university faculty, staff, and spouses. Students participate in two types of classes: (1) informal instruction using a cognitive, proficiency-based approach with informal evaluation and little or no homework, and (2) intensive conversation allowing for individualized vocabulary practice with the help of a bilingual specialist. Native speakers recruited from the university's international students provide tutoring when necessary. A commercial text is supplemented with other language or subject-specific materials. The class, not the materials, sets the pace of instruction. Faculty have used their skills in foreign travel, and the program has had a positive effect on faculty and staff attitudes about international programs on campus, including foreign language instruction. (MSE)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINING FOR UNIVERSITY PERSONNEL

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINING FOR UNIVERSITY PERSONNEL

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Recent years have seen increasing emphasis on language training for special purposes. Significant numbers of people whose professions bring them into contact with speakers of other languages have seen the need for developing proficiency in those languages. Language teachers have thus been asked to provide language instruction for these special purposes and materials for such instruction have even appeared: Spanish for medical personnel, Spanish for policemen, etc. The economic value of language training has helped provide impetus to the situation--witness the case of an agricultural economist at Oklahoma State University who could have had an $80,000 per year job in Africa if he just could have spoken French.

Because the advantages of having language skills are well-known on the Oklahoma State University campus, the OSU Office of International Programs sought and received, in 1978, federal funding to provide language training to University personnel. The original funding came under Title XII of the Famine Prevention Act and has been continued under a memorandum of understanding and support grant funding. The funding provides not only faculty salaries but also books, tapes, and other materials for students.

The original program, begun in 1978, included training in Chinese, French, and Spanish. Subsequently, cutbacks and difficulties in staffing have restricted the program to Spanish and French. The overall program has involved a number of faculty members from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures as well as approximately 1500 enrollments from faculty, staff, and their spouses. The program has been especially popular among personnel from the College of Agriculture, Engineering, and Business, all of which have a long history of international involvement. There are currently enrolled about 30 students in Spanish and about 20 in French, some of whom began their training in the original group, achieved a highly usable degree of language

skill, and stayed in the advanced group of the program to maintain their skills. Since the structure of the Spanish and the French programs is very similar, the following discussion will be confined to the Spanish part of the program.

Spanish classes are currently scheduled two evenings a week, from 7-9 p.m. Typically, the basic level sections meet Monday and Wednesday and the more advanced levels meet Tuesday and Thursday. Within each of these broad levels, students will be working at quite different levels of proficiency. In order to deal with this problem, the class is divided into two groups for each hour of instruction. One of these groups stays with a faculty member for a more or less formal instructional experience. These classes are conducted using a cognitive, proficiency-based approach, making allowances for the fact that no grades are assigned and evaluation is therefore done only on a very informal basis. In addition, the enrollees work long hours at their own jobs and have very little time left over to prepare for these classes. Therefore, no outside preparation is assumed, for which reason the teacher needs to do a great deal of repeating in order to facilitate retention of the material.

The other group is subdivided into small classes of not more than five students. These small groups then meet with a native speaker of Spanish for intensive conversation practice. Sufficient funding has been available so that a relatively large number of native speakers can be hired for special assignments. For example, in the case of a computer scientist who wanted specialized practice in the vocabulary of his field and related areas, the program was able to provide him with a graduate student from Colombia who was familiar with computers and computer terminology in both languages.

After the first hour of instruction, a short break is taken. During the second hour, the groups are reversed; that is, the large group which met with the Spanish professor is subdivided into small groups for conversation practice with the native speakers. The small groups are consolidated into one single class for more formal instruction, again using a cognitive, proficiency-oriented approach.

Native speakers of the target language are also used to provide tutoring sessions for students who fall significantly behind the level of their class or who begin the program late. Such a system enables the teacher to maintain a certain degree of homogeneity in each class and also helps the Department avoid a public relations problem with the enrollees, many of whom are also faculty members.

These native speakers are recruited from among the University's large population of international students. They tend to be graduate students or advanced undergraduates, mostly from technical fields, who are chosen for their subject matter area and for certain personality traits which suit them for the task. In addition to their linguistic expertise and their specialized knowledge in different academic fields, these native speakers add a dimension of authentic cultural contact which, besides increasing interest in the program, is very helpful to enrollees who are about to embark on a foreign travel experience.

Most enrollees begin the program at or near zero level. As time passes, students in such a zero level class progress at sufficiently different speeds so that differences in level soon become apparent. There is, in these classes, much greater disparity in the speed of movement through the material than is the case in a regular university class. There are a number of reasons for this: the fact that evaluation is done only very informally removes the typical incentive for studying. As previously mentioned, nearly everyone in the course has worked all day and comes to class in the evening after having had little time to prepare. And in addition, there is a great disparity in language learning aptitude and in previous exposure to foreign language study among the enrollees.

Commercial texts work very well in this course but as students reach more advanced levels of achievement, these texts need to be supplemented. We currently use Da Silva's Beginning Spanish as a core text book. Conversation classes use this text along with other materials such as Frank Sedwick's Conversation in Spanish or Spanish for

Careers. As students become more fluent, specialized materials from various academic fields are photocopied and used in class.

Every attempt is made to provide enrollees with a working Spanish vocabulary in their own field of expertise. This is accomplished by giving them readings from articles in their own field, by providing them with native speakers who have preparation in their field, and, when sufficient knowledge of the language has been achieved, by assigning them to make a class report on some topic from their own field which requires them to use the vocabulary of that field. Enrollees who have returned to the program after a trip to a Spanish-speaking country often give reports, in Spanish, on their experiences abroad. This sharing of experiences is important not only as a motivator for other enrollees, but it also gives the traveler a chance to polish and expand language skills.

A number of faculty members who are currently enrolled have put their newly-developed skills to good use in travels to several Spanish American countries, notably Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Mexico. One professor of agricultural economics, for example, recently presented 30 lectures in Spanish, in a period of 6 days, at the University of Chihuahua in Delicias, Mexico.

One of the most laudable results of this program has been the positive effect it has had on faculty and staff attitudes toward internationalism on the Oklahoma State University campus. Although the University's involvement in international programs is long established, and the opportunities for people who can speak a foreign language are well-known, such activity has been carried out by a relatively small number of staff and faculty personnel. This language program has broadened the base of support for international endeavors and has resulted in much good publicity for the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures as well.

This program is unique in that it progresses through its curriculum at the speed set by the class and is not concerned with covering a given body of material in a certain, pre-determined time period. All of the students enrolled in the program are there by

choice, and sometimes at considerable personal inconvenience; thus the teacher can be assured of getting their best effort. The program's flexibility enables the instructor to use native speaker conversation leaders who are conversant with the enrollees' fields of endeavor. They can provide valuable insights into Hispanic culture, an important aspect of the course, and one which makes it appealing to potential faculty enrollees.

This program has provided the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures with a number of advantages. The most obvious of them is the increased support for and involvement in the Department's main endeavor, teaching foreign languages. It has also provided additional summer employment for Department faculty members. The service which the department provides for the University community through this program has, in turn, provided the Department with many rewards.